

EPIPHANY

5 JANUARY 2025

Psalm 72. 1-7, 10-14

Ephesians 3. 1-12

Luke 2. 22-40

In some Anglican and Catholic churches in their Epiphany worship today, three figures from the nativity will be processed into the church at the beginning of the service, marking the coming of the wise men, the magi, the three kings. Matthew's Gospel tells us: *In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem. And so we sing about them: we three kings of orient are; as with gladness men of old; and by the light of that same star three wise men came from country far.* Epiphany is a season in the church's year when we reflect on the revealing of God's Christ to all people. In the coming of the wise ones, it is non-Jews who are recognising the birth of the Jewish-born Christ-child, the embodiment of the wisdom of God. For Matthew, this is a cosmic event reflected in the appearance of the star and the drawing forward of these wise ones.

So as we begin the season of Epiphany which will run for seven Sundays till the season of Lent begins, we are meant to hear that passage which begins with the line: *In the time of King Herod, ... wise men from the East came to Jerusalem.* And then we hear of Herod's jealousy and rage and the flight of the family to Egypt.

But, as we're reading Luke this year, I got to wondering about Luke's revealing of the Christ-child to all people – to the Gentiles, as all non-Jews were known. Does Luke, the master-story weaver, portrays this revealing, I wondered? And so, I wanted us to hear the words on the lips of Simeon:

for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

A light for revelation to the Gentiles?

So unlike Matthew where with the coming of the magi denotes an active movement toward the revealing, here in Luke the revealing is right at the centre from a point of stillness. Simeon and Anna are very still; waiting, attentive, watchful.

It is Joseph and Mary who make the movement toward this still centre. This faithful couple make the long journey all the way to the temple in Jerusalem, to fulfil the law. And here it is that Simeon prophesies: this child will break open the bounds of Israel and the purity code and he will be a light to the gentiles; the light that shines in the darkness will be a light to all.

It is Luke, in the Acts of the Apostles who gives us the most vivid image of the breaking open of the exclusive boundaries of Israel in the apostle Peter's vision on the rooftop when the sheet containing animals which were considered to be unclean for Jews eating; and he is told to eat. It is a vision which leads Peter to be able to say to the household of the Roman centurion Cornelius: *I truly understand that God shows no partiality, but in every nation anyone who fears him and does what is right is acceptable to him.* It is this same affirmation expressed by Paul in his letter to the

Galatians: *There is no longer Jew or Greek, there is no longer slave or free, there is no longer male and female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.* ²⁹*And if you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, heirs according to the promise.*

In the lead up to Christmas we heard the account of the birth of John the Baptist: the vision to Zechariah, serving in the Holy of Holies and the visitation of the angel Gabriel with the promise of a son in Zechariah and Elizabeth's old age; we heard the drama of the naming of the child as the divine name of John is given, which breaks with the tradition – an interruption; and we heard Zechariah's hymn of praise:

By the tender mercy of our God,
the dawn from on high will break upon us,
to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
to guide our feet into the way of peace.'

The child grew and became strong in spirit, and he was in the wilderness until the day he appeared publicly to Israel.

So, when John appears publicly to Israel, it is out by the Jordan river, at the place threshold, the watershed, the boundary over which the fleeing slaves cross into the promised land. It is the boundary over which the children of Abraham cross to possess the land promised to him. Moses has led them through the wilderness to become a people devoted to the Lord. Except they are not devoted to the Lord. They pillage and destroy and commit genocide. An exclusive people, with hard boundaries drawn around themselves. To the people who come to John for baptism at the Jordan he says: *'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruits worthy of repentance. Do not begin to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees;*

So as Luke sets the scene for a tremendous interruption. In the coming of the Christ we have a number of things happen: Zechariah, the priest who serves in the temple at the centre of the life of Israel is barren; fecundity, new life will only take place at the margin, it will only happen through a return to that point at which the Israelites were called to be a new people. And as we hear Simeon pray in the temple, again at the centre of the life of Israel: master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace, we hear a hymn of gratitude that these exclusive boundaries will be dissolved and it be acknowledged that the God who created the heavens and the earth is not a God who has favourites.

my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles

The possibility of new life for all uttered on old lips.

One of the hymns that we sing in the church is:

We are an ageing church
we are an ageing church
We all are doomed
we are an ageing church.

When I hear this mantra, I hear an undertone of guilt; that somehow we have failed; to start with, by simply getting older – as though ageing is some sort of careless oversight; blithely allowing each year to pass.

But here are Simeon and Anna, faithful and aged. Anna also is a prophet - she is a very old woman for the ancient world. They are models of stillness and attentiveness; the kind of attentiveness for the life of God that we are called to in the Advent season. Old eyes, peeled for the coming of the kingdom. Maybe their sight is dim with age; but the eyes of their hearts are keen and attentive.

Over the two decades I have been in ministry I have observed something about the gift of old age. I know many of you are not grateful for the physical ailments that are the consequence of old age; understandably so. But what I have observed is people entering a phase, a place, a demeanour which enables a letting go. It is a gift which is an ability to let go of hard and fast beliefs, the things that in the past we might have got in a lather about, or gone to the wall over; a phase where the distinction of opposites dissolve. There is a new-found detachment where hard categories of good and evil, right and wrong become softer and to some extent erode and as Fr Richard Rohr describes it, they come to a place where everything belongs. In this place of acceptance, of detachment, of equanimity we discover an unexpected grace and wisdom.

In our readings on Advent 4, the Sunday before Christmas, we heard the theme of the coming of divine wisdom, present at the beginning of Creation, into the world in the Word made flesh.

There is a conventional wisdom that says that simply in the accumulation of years we become wise. I haven't seen evidence to suggest that this true. I can recall a theological teacher warning a group of ministry candidates about older clergy who had been in the game for a long time and who might attempt to speak with authority, saying – now listen I have had 32 years in ministry – I've got a thing or two to teach you. The question my teacher asked was: have they developed 32 years of accumulated wisdom or have they had one year's experience 32 times over. Have they grown, or just repeated the same old-same old?

The getting of wisdom calls for a letting go in order to be able to embrace a bigger picture; to allow a dissolving of boundaries, not by our own will or by some kind of stock take and then jettisoning of particular sacred cows. If we are open to life and the work of the spirit, we are by life disabused of our brittleness and we become bigger, more hospitable, our being in the world characterised by grace and mercy.

The Jungian therapist and wise-woman Helen Luke writes of this place in ourselves which becomes infused with mercy. She writes of it as being overtaken by The Mercy. Maybe the expression The Mercy can be thought of as a name for God. *The Mercy becomes the only reality in every life, but [...] the individual remains free to choose whether he or she will let go of everything else so that the new person who is the creation of The Mercy will be born, or whether he or she will hold onto the old self, hold on to rejection of that emptiness which is the fullness of The Mercy.* This is not something we can manufacture, certainly we cannot will it; He gave power for them to become children of God, who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

I was walking with a friend on Thursday morning and we shared a kind of despair and sense of impotence about the state of things: the digital and, now, AI world our grandchildren are being

born into, the fatuous character of our politicians, the division of our society and world between the privileged and the expendable, the inability of political leaders to respond to the climate crisis. We both seemed to share a sense of despairing cynicism and feel tempted to withdraw into isolated comfort – easy, of course, for us who are in the wealthiest 1% of the world's population. We seemed to be asking ourselves: what wisdom have we gleaned or garnered along the way? What can we do, now that the energy for activism is more difficult to muster? And who is listening anyway? Will we join the cacophony, shouting at each other across the divide; mouthing platitudes, with no skin in the game.

Now master, you release your servant in peace ...

Through Advent, in various ways, we pray Come, Lord Jesus. The very still Simeon and Anna have been praying this prayer and so recognise the Christ when he appears – in the most unlikely guise – an infant being brought for presentation to the Lord. I wonder if we can experience ourselves as blessed in this way in our advancing years? Able to be still, to be centred, to know what is most needful, and to have the sight of the spirit to be able to see with the inner eye. May this be *The Mercy* which comes to us and may we be able to receive it when it is offered.

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